

Commodified, Disciplined, Deified: Mythological Women and Patriarchal Power in Pushpa Kurup's *Power Women*

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Abstract— Mythology does not merely preserve cultural memory; it also shapes social attitudes toward women, sexuality, obedience, and moral legitimacy. Indian mythological narratives have historically represented women through patriarchal ideals such as chastity, sacrifice, and devotion, thereby reducing female subjectivity to symbolic functions within male-centered traditions. *Power Women: A Journey into Hindu Mythology, Folklore and History* by Pushpa Kurup revisits mythological women whose voices have been marginalized or distorted within dominant retellings. This paper examines Kurup's reinterpretation of Madhavi, Renuka, and Kannagi through the theoretical framework developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak's argument shifts attention from silence itself to the structures that prevent marginalized women from being heard on their own terms. The paper also engages feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Simone de Beauvoir, and Shulamith Firestone to situate Kurup's work within broader feminist debates on patriarchy, female sexuality, and bodily control. Madhavi is commodified through reproductive exchange, Renuka is disciplined through surveillance of female desire, and Kannagi acquires authority only after conforming completely to patriarchal ideals of chastity and wifely devotion. Together, these narratives demonstrate that mythology does not simply reflect patriarchy but actively participates in preserving and legitimizing it. Kurup's feminist reinterpretation exposes the emotional and psychological dimensions erased by traditional retellings and restores complexity to women who were historically reduced to moral symbols.



Keywords— chastity, female agency, feminist reinterpretation, mythology, patriarchal silence, Spivak, subaltern, subjectivity

I. INTRODUCTION

Mythological narratives occupy a powerful position within Indian cultural consciousness because they shape not only collective memory but also social ideas regarding morality, gender, sexuality, and authority. Women within these narratives are frequently remembered through roles that privilege devotion, chastity, and sacrifice while suppressing emotional complexity and individual agency. Their stories are often filtered through patriarchal frameworks that determine which forms of femininity deserve reverence and which deserve punishment.

Feminist historians such as Uma Chakravarti have argued that patriarchal social structures in India depended heavily

upon regulating women's sexuality, reproductive roles, and bodily purity, particularly within Brahmanical traditions. Such systems transformed female virtue into a sociocultural requirement rather than a personal choice. Mythology became one of the most effective vehicles for preserving these ideological structures across generations.

Pushpa Kurup directly addresses this issue in *Power Women: A Journey into Hindu Mythology, Folklore and History* by arguing that mythological women have repeatedly been "misrepresented, ignored, suppressed, silenced and marginalized by male writers like Valmiki and Ved Vyasa" (4). Her project belongs to a larger feminist tradition of revisiting mythology from women's

perspectives. Scholars such as Nabaneeta Dev Sen have similarly emphasized that feminist retellings of myth challenge inherited narrative authority by recovering voices and experiences excluded from dominant canonical traditions.

The theoretical framework for this paper comes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak argues that marginalized women are not merely denied speech. More significantly, the institutional structures surrounding them reinterpret, absorb, or erase their voices before those voices can acquire independent meaning. Systems of power speak for subaltern women while simultaneously preventing them from defining themselves.

This paper applies Spivak's framework to three women discussed in Kurup's text: Madhavi, Renuka, and Kannagi. Though they emerge from different mythological traditions, all three are shaped by patriarchal structures that regulate female agency in distinct ways. Madhavi is commodified through exchange, Renuka is disciplined through moral surveillance, and Kannagi is celebrated only after embodying patriarchal ideals of chastity and devotion. Through these narratives, mythology reveals itself not as a neutral cultural archive but as an active participant in preserving gendered power structures.

II. MADHAVI AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

Madhavi's story reveals how patriarchal systems transform women into instruments of exchange. She is introduced as the daughter of King Yayati and possesses the unusual boon of regaining her virginity after childbirth. When Sage Galava cannot provide the horses demanded by Vishwamitra as guru dakshina, Yayati offers Madhavi instead. She is subsequently passed from one king to another in exchange for horses and compelled to bear sons for each of them (Kurup 67).

The narrative depends entirely upon the exclusion of Madhavi's desires. Fathers negotiate her future, sages determine her purpose, and kings accept her as part of a contractual arrangement. At no stage is her consent treated as meaningful. Her body becomes a medium through which masculine obligations are fulfilled.

Shulamith Firestone argues that patriarchal societies historically organized power around the control of women's reproductive functions. Madhavi's repeated circulation among kings reflects precisely such a system, where fertility becomes detached from female subjectivity and converted into exchange value. Her reproductive

capacity is treated not as part of her humanity but as a transferable social resource.

The so-called boon of restored virginity intensifies this commodification rather than liberating her from it. The restoration serves patriarchal anxiety surrounding purity and possession. It allows the same system to repeatedly consume her body while preserving the illusion of untouched chastity. Madhavi is thus rendered infinitely exchangeable, posing no threat to masculine ideas of purity or legitimacy.

Spivak's framework clarifies the structural implications of this arrangement. The issue is not only that Madhavi remains unheard. More importantly, the entire system surrounding her assumes that male authorities can represent her interests without consulting her at all. Her identity is continuously spoken for by fathers, sages, and kings.

Kurup sharply critiques the conduct of both Galava and Vishwamitra. Despite their spiritual authority, they participate comfortably in an exchange that reduces Madhavi to transactional value. Kurup observes that Vishwamitra's conduct reflects the logic of a commercial transaction, one in which Madhavi's humanity disappears beneath her utility (68).

Eventually, Madhavi withdraws into the forest and refuses marriage. Traditional readings often interpret this act as liberation or spiritual renunciation. Yet such an interpretation remains complicated. Her withdrawal occurs only after repeated exploitation has exhausted every meaningful alternative available to her. The forest becomes less a freely chosen refuge than the final space outside patriarchal circulation.

III. RENUKA AND THE PATRIARCHAL DISCIPLINE OF FEMALE DESIRE

Kurup describes Renuka as "an icon of unabashed female sexuality" (184). The phrase deliberately challenges traditional portrayals of Renuka as a woman corrupted by impurity. Instead of treating desire itself as transgression, Kurup shifts attention toward the system that criminalizes female interiority.

The episode unfolds with remarkable severity. Renuka, wife of Sage Jamadagni, experiences a momentary feeling of attraction while fetching water. Some versions specify that she sees a handsome man, while others leave the source of desire undefined. Jamadagni interprets her disturbed emotional state as evidence of moral corruption, and orders his sons to kill her. Four sons refuse and are cursed. Parashurama obeys and is rewarded.

The narrative permits no distinction between thought and action, which subjects female interiority directly to patriarchal discipline. Renuka neither acts upon desire nor attempts deception. Yet her internal experience alone becomes sufficient justification for punishment.

Uma Chakravarti observes that Brahmanical patriarchy depended heavily upon regulating female sexuality because lineage purity and social order were tied to women's bodies. Renuka's punishment reveals the extremity of that logic. Even involuntary desire becomes intolerable because patriarchal authority requires absolute control over feminine consciousness itself.

Spivak's argument becomes particularly significant here. She suggests that subaltern women cannot easily produce meaning on their own terms because institutional structures have already predetermined how their experiences will be interpreted. Renuka's silence is therefore not accidental. The narrative framework eliminates the possibility of self-definition before her perspective can even emerge.

Although later versions resurrect her through Parashurama's boon, the restoration does not return autonomy to Renuka. Her survival depends entirely on masculine authority. Eventually, her identity becomes associated with sati and idealized devotion rather than with the violence she endured. Patriarchal tradition transforms her into a symbol of obedience while suppressing the disciplinary structure underlying her story.

Kurup's reinterpretation resists this symbolic reduction by treating female desire as fundamentally human rather than morally corrupt. The narrative thereby exposes a patriarchal order that seeks control not merely over women's actions but also over their thoughts, emotions, and psychological autonomy.

IV. KANNAGI AND THE POLITICS OF CHASTE RAGE

Among the women discussed in this paper, Kannagi appears to possess the greatest degree of agency. In the Tamil epic tradition, she confronts royal authority, exposes injustice, and destroys the city of Madurai through the force of her rage. Yet the conditions under which her voice acquires legitimacy remain deeply tied to patriarchal ideals.

Kannagi's husband Kovalan abandons her for a courtesan and later returns after losing his wealth. Kannagi accepts him without resistance and offers him her final anklet so they may rebuild their lives. When Kovalan is falsely accused of theft and executed by the king, Kannagi enters the royal court and proves Kovalan's innocence by

demonstrating that her anklet differs from the queen's (Kurup 203–05). In grief and fury, she destroys Madurai.

Kannagi undoubtedly speaks with extraordinary authority. However, Spivak's framework raises a more difficult question: why is she heard? Her legitimacy emerges precisely because she has already fulfilled patriarchal expectations of chastity, patience, forgiveness, and wifely devotion.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that patriarchal societies reward women insofar as they embody roles constructed for them by androcentric culture. Kannagi's authority emerges not outside patriarchy but through near-perfect conformity to its expectations regarding ideal womanhood.

Kurup observes that Kannagi's destruction of Madurai demonstrates the immense symbolic power attached to feminine chastity and grief within this tradition (205). Yet this symbolic power remains conditional. A woman lacking chastity or refusing marital devotion would not receive equivalent moral recognition. Patriarchal culture permits Kannagi's rage because her suffering validates the values it already considers sacred.

This contradiction forms the central tension within Kannagi's story. She simultaneously resists patriarchal injustice and derives symbolic authority from the same ideological system that limits other women. Her resistance is genuine, but it remains inseparable from the dominant logic that grants legitimacy only to the ideal wife.

Unlike Madhavi and Renuka, Kannagi is not silenced through exclusion or punishment alone. Instead, her speech is selectively authorized under conditions determined by patriarchal morality itself.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: DIFFERENT SILENCES, SAME STRUCTURE

The stories of Madhavi, Renuka, and Kannagi reveal different mechanisms through which patriarchal systems regulate women's lives and identities. Madhavi is controlled through commodification and reproductive exchange. Renuka is disciplined through surveillance of female interiority. Kannagi is idealized and selectively empowered through chastity.

Despite these differences, the underlying structure remains consistent. In all three narratives, patriarchal authority maintains itself by controlling not only women's bodies but also the terms through which female experience becomes socially intelligible. Women are permitted recognition only within interpretive frameworks already defined by masculine authority.

Spivak's theoretical framework is especially useful because it shifts attention from isolated acts of oppression toward the systems that produce and regulate meaning itself. Even Kannagi, who speaks most forcefully, acquires legitimacy only within boundaries already sanctioned by dominant ideology. Her speech does not entirely escape the structures that authorize it.

Kurup's reinterpretations resist these inherited frameworks by restoring emotional depth and psychological realism to mythological women. She repeatedly asks what these women may have experienced internally within situations imposed upon them. Such interventions align with the larger feminist project identified by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, who argues that women's retellings of mythology challenge the authority of canonical narratives by recovering suppressed female perspectives.

At the same time, feminist reinterpretation is itself an act of reconstruction rather than neutral recovery. Kurup does not simply uncover hidden truths buried within mythology. She actively reimagines these women through a contemporary feminist consciousness. That interpretive intervention is precisely what gives her work its critical and political significance.

VI. CONCLUSION

Madhavi, Renuka, and Kannagi continue to occupy significant positions within Indian cultural memory. Yet the forms in which they are remembered reveal how mythology frequently preserves patriarchal ideology alongside narrative tradition. Madhavi's exploitation is normalized as duty and sacrifice. Renuka's punishment becomes absorbed into narratives of devotion and purity. Kannagi's rage is sanctified only because it emerges from idealized chastity and wifely loyalty.

Pushpa Kurup challenges these simplified representations by foregrounding the emotional and psychological realities erased within conventional retellings. Her reinterpretations expose the structures through which mythology disciplines female desire, regulates female bodies, and authorizes women only under restrictive moral conditions.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provides the theoretical vocabulary necessary to understand this process. Her concept of the subaltern reveals how patriarchal systems pre-empt female speech by interpreting women before women can define themselves independently. At the same time, the paper also demonstrates that mythological women such as Kannagi partially achieve symbolic authority, even if that authority remains conditional and structurally constrained.

Together, Kurup's feminist reinterpretations and Spivak's postcolonial feminist framework yield a reading in which mythology emerges as an active cultural mechanism for preserving gendered hierarchies. The mythological woman was never naturally silent. She was systematically silenced, disciplined, interpreted, and remembered through structures designed to speak for her rather than with her.

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